

**ACCESS TO PUBLIC LANDS: A CASE STUDY OF SAGUARO NATIONAL PARK  
AND X-9 RANCH**

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**Abstract:** Public access to public lands has created a series of conflicts between those with different interests in those lands. The relationship between Saguaro National Park and the X-9 Ranch is a good case study that illustrates the conflicts between private landowners and those who want to recreate on the public lands adjacent to the private landowners' lands. This case study also illustrates the effects conflicts can have on the recreational experience, and the fact that these effects can have long term consequences on providing access or not.

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Public access to public lands has created a series of conflicts between those with different interests in those lands. Many public lands are fragmented due to homestead patents, mining claims, railroad grants, state-in-lieu elections and other legal conditions (Leavell 2006). In Arizona, about 4.5 million acres of State Trust and other public lands, or 6.1% of Arizona, is "landlocked" by privately owned lands and not legally accessible by public means such as established right-of-ways, easements, etc. (AZGFD). As a result access to part or all of some public lands is restricted, such that only the landowner adjacent to the public lands can legally access the land. To some, this is a problem because they believe that public lands belong to the people, and as a result they should be accessible to all the people and not just a select few.

Another argument is that the current access points of public lands are overcrowded and negatively affecting the visitor's experience, and if more access points would be created (or reopened) then the overcrowding would decrease.

The major argument against providing access to public lands is that it would affect the environment of that area too much, with impacts of soil compaction, soil erosion, pollution, decreased vegetation and decreased wildlife. New public access points will also result in new conflicts between users that land managers will be charged with resolving.

The objective of this paper is to present a case study that deals with access to the Madrona Ranger Station (MRS) in Saguaro National Park, Rincon Mountain District, Arizona.

## **STUDY AREA**

The Madrona Ranger Station was built next to Chiminea Canyon of Saguaro National Park at the foot of the southern slope of the Rincon Mountains (Figure 1). The trailhead to Manning Camp is just south of this building. The area near the MRS is riparian with sycamore trees, desert willows, mesquite, and various shrubs and grasses. The creekbed consists of granite bedrock and sand bordered by small boulders and steep cliffsides. This area has perennial pools that are home to the various turtles, frogs, lizards, and mammals.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Madrona pools area of Saguaro National Park was developed in the 1940s-1960s to be a picnic area and popular visitation site, much like Sabino Canyon of the Coronado National Forest is today (Personal Communication: R. Pinto, October 2006). This area had a ranger

### **Figure 1: Saguaro National Park: Rincon Mountain District**

[http://gorp.away.com/gorp/resource/us\\_national\\_park/az/map\\_sag.htm](http://gorp.away.com/gorp/resource/us_national_park/az/map_sag.htm)



station and corrals that were built at the trailhead to Manning Camp – a popular hiking destination back then as well as today. During this period of time the MRS underwent a series of developments, all of which demonstrated the Monument’s desire at that time to keep the area running, maintained, and visitor friendly (Table 1). Until 1968, monthly narratives of the Superintendent of Saguaro National Park to the Director always included Madrona as one of the five places to record weather and visitation data, indicating that this area was a key element of the Monument (Giles1967b). The MRS also stabled horses and mules to go up to Manning Camp and was a supply station for forest fires (Personal Communication: R. Pinto, October 2006). The Madrona Ranger Station is located on the northern boundary of the X-9 Ranch. This ranch (named by its cattle brand) was a large ranching operation that had permits to graze upwards of

**Table 1: Developments to Madrona Ranger Station in 1940s-1960s**

Date	Development
April 1945	Telephone system installed at Madrona
July 1945	Dam at Madrona nearly complete
December 1947	Electric fence installed
May 1948	Barn Re-roofed

January 1949	Blacksmith shop and shed built
February 1951	Bedroom added to station
August 1953	Corral and hay-barn rehabilitated
December 1956	New roof put on residence and bunkhouse
March 1963	Shop and corral rewired
April 1963	Weather observation equipment installed
December 1965	10,000 gallon water tank installed

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From Saguaro National Park Superintendent Monthly Report Abstracts

242 head cattle on large tracts of Park and Forest Service land until 1968 (Saguaro National Park Superintendent Monthly Report Abstracts). In 1955 Henry Jackson bought the X-9 and lived in the area until his death (Espinosa et al. 2003). Somehow, in the process of the MRS being built and the X-9 Ranch getting put into operation, there was no easement that led from a public road to the ranger station. As a result, the only access to the station was via the X-9 Ranch Road on Henry Jackson's private property.

November of 1965 marked the first recorded conflict between the X-9 and the Park when the X-9 installed a locked gate for the mule deer hunting season (Saguaro National Park Superintendent Monthly Report Abstracts). In 1966 there was more hunting pressure in the Madrona area, which resulted in two X-9 steers being shot (even though hunting is not allowed on Park lands or on X-9 lands) (Cowgill 1967). These conflicts continued in 1967 when javelina and bobcats hunters were caught on Park and X-9 land (Cowgill 1967). On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April the X-9 loading chute was left open (presumably by Madrona visitors) and 30-40 head of cattle escaped (Giles 1967a). Several cowboys spent a full day to round up the cattle, and as a result, the X-9 put a lock on the gate. In April and May of 1967 steel and wood fence posts and barb wire was installed on the X-9 Ranch entrance road to Madrona, and the access road to the MRS was effectively closed on June 15, 1967 (Giles 1967b). This closure is reportedly due to a Park visitor taking potshots at Henry Jackson's daughter, but neither the Superintendent's report nor

the newspaper article on the closure mention this (Personal Communication: R. Pinto, October 2006).

After access to the MRS was closed, only Park officials with gate keys and permission were allowed access. Visitation to the site dropped by 93% (Table 2). For the next couple decades the Park discussed and brainstormed on how to reopen access to the station, despite the superintendent's acknowledgement in 1968 that the horse stable, corral and picnic area at the MRS negatively affected the natural resources in the area, specifically the saguaro (Giles 1968). The 1971 Draft Master Plan of Saguaro National Park recognized the need to buy land from the X-9 to help resolve the matter, but this land was then subdivided into 36 acres lots and sold to private landowners (Espinosa et al. 2003). In 1976 the Park again discussed how they could

**Table 2: Visitation to Madrona Ranger Station in May and June 1967**

May		June	
Activity		Activity	
Picnicking	269	Picnicking	5
Sightseeing	102	Sightseeing	
Hikers	90	Hikers	12
Campers	3	Campers	
Riders	8	Riders	
Total Visitors	472	Total Visitors	17

(Giles 1967a; Giles 1967b)

provide access to the station, and even went as far as doing an archeological study of the area in case the access plans ever went through (Goddard 1976). Unfortunately, most of the records from the 1970s-1980s were thrown away (Personal Communication: Khaleel Saba November 2006), but there are rumors of one of the Park's superintendents making a deal with Henry

Jackson that access to the MRS would never occur (Personal Communication: Randy Gimblett November 2006). Also, sometime in this time period the MRS had a severe mice/hantivirus infestation and the MRS was closed.

Two studies have been performed in Saguaro National Park that deal with the issue of access to MRS. One of the objectives of a recreational use survey of visitors, neighbors, and organized groups around the Park focused on opinions on public access to the MRS (Shand and Underhill 1985). Of 403 survey takers, 80% of locals and 70% of non locals believed that access to Madrona should be regained. When this question was asked again, in a different way, to only locals, 45% of residents thought access should be regained, 16% did not want access, and the rest did not care. Of the 90 residents who took the survey, only 7 actually used the Madrona area. Another survey in 2005 monitored the visitor use level at the MRS (Gimblett and Sharp 2005). This survey found that between September of 2004 and April of 2005 around 1700 people visited the Madrona area, though it was uncertain how many of those people were researchers, administrators, residents of the X-9 Ranch, or members of the general public.

Today the relationship between the Saguaro National Park and the X-9 Ranch is tenuous at best. Park researchers and officials still have special permission to use the X-9 road, but a lot of the officials have a concern that any one thing will cause a conflict that will ban the access (like driving too fast on the road, stopping to see the wildlife, talking to residents, etc.). The idea of obtaining public access to this area no longer seems to be an option; now the Park is just concerned with keeping good relations with the X-9. One of the reasons why the Park is so concerned is that the people who live in the X-9 are among the best and brightest of Tucson, including several lawyers, doctors, and authors with million dollar houses and political clout.

Why do people want access to the Madrona Ranger Station so much? First, the closest trailhead to Manning Camp is at the MRS, and the MRS is a convenient place to park your car or horse trailer and go to Manning Camp – one of the most popular camping destinations of the Park. Second, the pools next to the MRS have a high aesthetic value, and the fact that so few people have visited (and affected) the area versus other riparian areas of the Park makes the MRS a desirable place to visit. Finally, people who visited the area before 1967, or who have been able to visit the area by getting special permission of the Park have fond memories of the area and would rather not have to get special permission whenever they would want to revisit the area.

This case study shows that conflicts between recreational users and private landowners can affect which areas can be accessed by the public and can have long lasting future consequences for that recreational area. The benefit of having no public access to the Madrona area is that the area is saved from the effects that recreational use can have on an area (soil compaction, pollution etc.). However, one has to consider if it is fair for a select, privileged few to have unlimited access to part of a public land while everyone else has to get special permission to access the same area. One mindset is that it should be all or nothing – either everyone has access or no one does. Another issue is if a former superintendent actually did sign a contract that promised the X-9 that public access would never be given to the MRS? Does such a document exist, and would such a document be legal?

## **LITERATURE CITED**

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